DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 205 947 CS 206 077

AUTHOR Moss, Peter
TITLE Telling Tales: Australian Voices. Australian Studies in Language and Education Monograph Series.
INSTITUTION Curriculum Development Centre, Canberra (Australia).
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 42p.
AVAILABLE FROM Curriculum Development Centre, P. O. Box 52, Dickson, A. C. T. 2602, Australia.

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS English Instruction; Foreign Countries; Language Usage; *Oral History; *Oral Language; *Speech Communication; *Story Telling; *Tales
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

This monograph contains a report of the field work stage of a research project, on the educational significance of the modern Australian oral tradition, which involved the collection of recordings of people telling tales, reminiscing, recalling personal events of significance, and recounting traditional Australian legends from non-Aboriginal sources. Transcripts are provided in the first seven chapters for tales of the fictive life (memory), the urban tale (retelling a story event), the confession tale (a recounting of a very personal incident), the frontier tale (filled with fanciful delights), the work tale (a story event full of interest in itself and located firmly in a pride of work), the death tale (an all-encompassing event and state of mind that impinge on the individual), and the life tale (a steady look at a life presented simply). The final chapter explores the use of the tapes and transcripts in the classroom (HOD)

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Australian Studies in Language and Education
Monograph Series

Telling Tales: Australian Voices

Peter Moss

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CS206077

First published in 1977 by Australia International Press and Publications Pty. Ltd.
397 Little Collins St, Melbourne, Victoria
186 Darling St Balmain, N.S.W.
P.O. Box 369 Fyshwick, A.C.T.
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National Library of Australia card number and ISBN
Paper Bound Edition 0 642 960 33 X
Typeset in Baskerville by Setting Sixty Nine

Foreword

This publication is one of a series commissioned by the National Committee on English Teaching. The funding of the Committee's program became the responsibility of the Curriculum Development Centre from 1 July, 1976.

The purposes of the series are set out on the rear cover. The views expressed are those of the author's and are not necessarily those of the Committee or the Centre. The Centre commends the Committee's initiative in producing the series.

M. SKILBECK
Director
Curriculum Development Centre

Acknowledgements

A word of appreciation is due to my research assistants, Wendy Lowenstein of Melbourne and Michael Schumacher of Adelaide. They laboured long and uncomplainingly both at the field-work stage and in the editing process under my direction.

The project was funded by a grant from the Australian Advisory Committee on Research and Development in Education. P.M.

Contents

Foreword V
Acknowledgements VI
Telling Tales: Australian Voices 1
The Fictive Life: 5
The Urban Tale: 9
The Confession Tale: 13
The Frontier Tale: 17
The Work Tale: 21
Death Tales: 25
Life Tale: 29
The Classroom Context: 31
Appendix 39

6

Telling Tales: Australian Voices

This monograph is a report of the first stage of a research project entitled 'The Modern Australian Oral Tradition and its Educational Significance'. The field-work stage has been completed: recordings have been made of people telling tales, reminiscing, recalling personal events of significance and recounting traditional Australian legends from non-Aboriginal sources. The second stage of the project is an 'experimental' one, where the tapes will be tried out in English lessons so as to determine their practical significance.

I am fully aware of the anomalous position I am in when trying to argue **in print** for an oral tradition. The reason for the writing medium here is obvious and the situation immediately highlights the narrow base upon which the language experience, offered to children, stands. Despite the burgeoning of audio-visual techniques and materials many of which, if not suspect, are, at best, only of peripheral value for the English lesson, most of the sources used in English teaching are words on the page. There is no evidence almost a decade after the Dartmouth Seminar, that oral work in schools has developed a legitimate place in the teaching of English. I recognise that much more talk is **allowed**, even encouraged, but I cannot accept that a mere discussion lesson, with all the opportunities for individual children to switch off or, worse, merely rehearse prejudices, is legitimate.*

It is ironic and tragic that, as teachers in an electronic age, we have allowed the **methods** of the media to dictate how we use them. Specifically, the creative use of the tape recorder is virtually non-existent. It is merely a tool used as a plaything or as an isolator of children from living classroom-contacts. The 'aims

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*This is not to be taken that I undervalue or devalue the fine **atmosphere created** by gifted teachers, whereby children in pairs or groups talk about themselves, their world and about books. But this, I take it, is partly a deliberate language policy which aims at providing varied opportunities for them to be serious.

and objectives people' have encouraged it to be used, wittingly or otherwise, as an instrument to de-humanise our classrooms.* I don't believe that the view of education that emphasises methods and processes will ever be banished from the educational scene — it is, after all, a reflex of industrial society — but one may, just may, be able to limit its sterilising influence if one takes the initiative with words. Oral traditions and spoken language are important elements in any effort to recreate a centre for English studies.

From the conflicting sets of assumptions, in state and national teacher publications, it is clear that English teaching in Australia is fragmented. Over the past few years two different positions have been espoused. For the sake of brevity, and it is something of an oversimplification, these can be presented as the literature position and the language position. The first one seeks to place imaginative literature, with the consequent symbolic and metaphoric language emphasis, at the centre of English studies. The second position seeks to place what could be called the 'language of familiarity' at the centre, so that children are educated by and with the 'language of use'.

That the teaching of literature and the worlds of the moral and personal imagination can be called into question at all, is a damning reflection upon our culture, but, for children growing up and gradually developing their learning and language abilities, these approaches alone cannot be sufficient. On the other hand, to encourage children in their own environment, using their own speech, without eventually and consciously presenting them with material which forces them to consider values and valuings from other people's worlds, is also lacking (and lack-lustre!). Nowhere has a synthesis-in-practice been made of these opposing standpoints. I want to offer, at this stage in a tentative way, the oral tradition as both a link between and as a bridge across the oppositions.

The view that the oral tradition is dead is true only in a limited way, in the sense that it no longer has a formally institutionalised role within the fabric of our society.† What Parker terms 'the devastating calibre of ordinary speech'‡ is confirmation that 'the tradition' is not dead. My work provides ample evidence that ordinary speech in Australia has a great and moving vitality and that it is largely untouched in our school work. That the felt utterances of people (as opposed to media 'personalities') all around us have been ignored, and even despised, is further comment upon the narrow range of language that is offered to children and students. It is extraordinary that the clear implications of much of Wordsworth's claims for the speech of ordinary men have not been followed up and developed. One example from *The Prelude* is sufficient to make the point. In Book XIII§ the poet recovered his 'imagination and taste' amid nature where:

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*I have not space to develop a practical scheme for 'creative' use of the tape recorder but interested readers should refer to the following articles of that brilliant pioneer in the field, Charles Parker: 'The Radio Ballad' in *New Society*, (November 1963), pp. 25-7, and 'Culture, Education and the Deprived' K. Calthrop and G. Owens (edd.) in *Teachers for Tomorrow*, (London 1971).

†I am thinking, here, of the function of oral folklore where it is both maintainer of the culture and guide to acceptable social conduct.

‡C. Parker, 'The Radio Ballad', in *New Society*, 14 November 1963, pp. 25-7.

§1850 Edition, 1-182-185.

> . . . There I heard,
> From mouths of men obscure and lowly, truths
> Replete with honour; sounds in unison
> With loftiest promises of good and fair.

It is a view which holds that uncorrupted common speech, when heightened by passion and imagination, binds men together. This assertion of a special kind of 'language community' (or, better, a community through language), points up through contrast the lack of commitment to the spoken word in our society. Compare the Wordsworthian doctrine with the daily offerings from radio and television. Two recognisable examples will suffice. Note the speech of politicians and public servants, with its deliberate fostering of a hollow neutrality in the meanings of words and the cultivation of non-eloquence in style in the interests of 'clarity' — powerful tendencies amongst our political and administrative betters. To be fair, these formal public languages have an heroic quality about them, for they continually force human speech into a neutrality which it cannot suffer for long without damaging something — language, speaker or both! In contrast, the other example opposed to a Wordsworthian view is the language of advertising and it offers a very different opposition from the first example. Unlike the insistent opacity of 'public men's language', advertising copy possesses verve and inventiveness, but lacks honour. It is a language without dignity, without felt existence, where words are only 'good' if they are saleable, and they are always for sale.

It is ironic that the daily bombardment of speech has driven out the very qualities of prose. Institutions of higher education have also contributed to this state of affairs in their de-emphasising of the reading (aloud) of texts, as opposed to the study of texts. To fully know a prose text it is necessary to hear and feel its movement, its rhythm. Kenneth Burke puts this 'knowing' brilliantly:

> . . . in all rhythmic experiences one's muscular imagination is touched. Similarly with sounds . . . since [they] may rise and fall and in a remote way one rises and falls with them.*

The tapes collected and edited offer these multiple movements, movements of people using language in many different ways but never in ways that conceal or debase language and meaning.

The teaching of English is in such a bad way that even the word 'literature', which neutrally indicates a major area of concern in teachers' professional lives, can cause a reaction at the nerve-ends. I have met many teachers who will immediately use the word 'elite' and dismiss the subject forthwith. What they teach in their classrooms is anybody's guess. There are others whom I have met who will make aggressive pleas to teach pop-song lyrics, as 'poetry-literature'.† They see such lyrics as being the only fit topics for teenagers ('part of their world' and all that cant). I am, therefore, forced to state what I mean by the term 'literature' as it concerns teachers in the classroom. It is any form of words

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*K. Burke, *Counterstatement*, (Los Altos Calif., 1953,) p.14.

†For colleagues interested in a recent examination of pop, poetry and music, see Peter Abbs (ed.), *The Black Rainbow*, (London, 1975); especially the following essays, Ian Robinson's, 'Paper Tygers', and Charles Parker's, 'Pop Song: The Manipulated Ritual'.

(spoken or written) that involves the bringing together of an experience and a consideration of that experience. The experience itself may be of deep significance for the teller or writer, or it may be nothing more than a remembered incident. The crucial point is that, in the telling or the writing, some shaping and ordering process is at work. While such a view includes a wide variety of forms, it does not keep out traditional forms. But there is a rejection implied, and it is that of the literary-critical view which sees the artist's central concern to be the act of creation as an end in itself. Such a view misses a lot. When a writer begins to write there is no construction present in the writer's head. The concentration of the mind is upon something which precedes words and against which the words must be checked as they are written. It is that kind of personal, imaginative concentration and the social reality that it can imply, that we should bring into the classroom.

As an old man, a teller of traditional (Gaelic) Irish tales, when asked why he told stories replied, 'to help me to forget my sorrows'.* This is a well-used justification for watching, listening and reading. But there is more to it than this. Sometimes we tell and write in order to understand, to come to terms with an event in which we were involved. We also recount tales and events for sheer pleasure, both private and social. Occasionally, the shaping and the sharing is a way back into our pasts, an attempt to recreate something gone forever but still making present tracks in our lives.

All of us have such things to say. As teachers we may well find it worthwhile to search for such material, in order to provide language riches for our students.

*J.H. Delargy, 'The Gaelic Storyteller', in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, (1945), pp. 172-223.

The Fictive Life:

MEMORY

In the early 1940s I used to live at the side of a lane which led down to the local fields, and this was the route that the local Home Guard used to take when they were popping down to the fields in their various manoeuvres. I wasn't quite five at the time and there was a group of us – five, six, seven – varied. When the lads came down – they didn't have rifles of course – that's the Home Guard – they had pickaxe handles. They were quite serious about it. They used to march down the lane and we used to tag on the back and follow them. You know – marching along with little wooden tommy guns. These lads were a motley bunch and very few of them had uniforms. They would march down this lane, quite serious, for about three quarters of a mile until they got into Simon's field. I remember that quite well – about 1942 it would be – harvest time – all the corn was cut and stacked in stooks and these chaps used to – well actually they used to play – at being soldiers. And we used to tag along at the back. But we got tired quicker than they did. The thing is they never bothered about us – they never said 'bugger off'. They just ignored us. Anyway, we got tired and we wandered off.

We always seemed to go the same way. The field next to it had a stream along the bottom. We always used to make for the stream – go along the edge of the stream. The interesting thing – we always kept close to this stream, you see – a special reason. We sometimes used to like to get out of that field in a bit of a hurry and the best way was across this stream. You see – the reason we had to get out of the field in a hurry was because most of the time there was a stallion there. He was – you know – quite a savage beast. Of course, when it wasn't there, the favourite trick was to run around the field looking for dead hedgehogs. This memory stays with me quite a lot. This field is practically littered with hedgehogs that this stallion had trampled on. We used to wander around – there were a lot of hedgehogs about. He just trampled them flat. I don't know whether you have ever seen a trampled hedgehog.

That sort of memory – my memories of the war in which I didn't participate. Something else that I can remember quite well is what – some fourteen years later – around about 1956. I was in a RAF camp on the Downs. We were hanging about waiting. Saturday – I remember quite well – about half past eleven. We were lined up getting jabs for the Middle East. They didn't mess about. We got two in each arm at the same time – pretty fantastic! It made a mess of your weekend but it didn't matter as you weren't going anywhere. You were on stand-by and just

hanging about waiting to go. Anyway, when the orders came we went to Lineham. Comet from Lineham to Cyprus and then from there onwards. We ended up at Suez. We weren't going with the first mob. We went in after all the excitement was over, theoretically. We had a job to do, go in, get the job done and come right out.

We were pouring along there in these old lorries when all of a sudden the sort of leading one — what would it be — quite a large effort — it made a big bang and it sort of rolled over. I suppose after that we must have — I have no memory of jumping out of the lorry I was in, but we must have done. I sort of remember I was on the sand — very still — I was just really petrified. My right eye couldn't see anything — wasn't functioning for some reason. The right side of my face was pressing down in to the sand — somewhere in the front of my head — couldn't see — but I knew it was there. My right fist was clenched going into the sand. I lay out somewhere alongside the left eye, my left hand was sort of pressing into the sand. And underneath me — well I know — underneath me my right knee was sort of doubled up and stretching outwards. I think I must have been on some kind of a slope, in some kind of a hollow, stretched out going down the slope. At the back of the slope was my left leg sort of going up hill. I could just move my eye. I could see out to the left, I could see my hand and I could swivel my eye around and there was an archway formed by my left arm and there was light. I could see through it. And through it I could just see my left leg and the left leg was covered in — well — it was blood. I just couldn't feel a thing in the left leg and just conscious outside — couldn't see — but outside my face was pressing down — but outside the noise was rising and then it fell away. And suddenly, quietly, a voice said, 'Heh, heh there, reach'. I looked out over my left hand and there was a black hand. I pushed my left hand out to it and these two hands mingled and the hand pulled me under the truck. It explored my left leg, this soft voice — couldn't see who it was — said, 'It's all right — it's not your blood — you're not bleeding'. When he looked at me it was Benjamin.

I didn't know Benjamin very well. I met him twice — two or three times before. About three weeks before we had been out in the field to a Vulcan. He'd carried the tools. Well I just stayed there under the truck and the noise gradually subsided and we were looking out and we saw five Egyptians, without weapons, and they had their arms in the air, a well-known pose — prisoners. They slowly came across and they were going to give themselves up. We could see them coming. Suddenly they lay down in the sand, face down, with their arms in front of them and they stayed there. And over to my right a regiment sergeant type. I can see his face now — just see his face. He didn't seem to have any lips on his face, I remember that quite well. Slowly he reversed his half-track jeep effort — reversed it over their feet, the bugger! Benjamin and I were both upset about this, lying under the truck. It sort of upset us and Benjamin sort of wriggled out and rose into the air — his hands went up first. He didn't say anything. He was just horrified. He stretched up into the air with his arms first and out of nowhere, we didn't see it, but we just heard the sound — just a little thud. Then his arms wagged, they dropped like a bird — a sea bird that couldn't find air, and his knees bent — they just slumped onto the sand. His body dropped back on his legs and his head was right in front of me where I was lying down. And in the middle of his forehead he'd got another eye. It was

a bloody one and all I could think of at the time was the government! The bastards! All their fault, all their fault!

I remember these chaps who were quite serious when I was a lad strolling around from corn stook to corn stook. They never spoke to us, they just went about their job. They were very serious and we got tired and we disappeared to the stream in the field and we looked for dead hedgehogs if the stallion wasn't there. I balance the memory of these chaps being serious with the memory of the hedgehogs, but the other memories — I don't worry so much about Benjamin — The thought strikes me is that I could have stood up — I could have had a bloody hole in the head. That's not the thing that worried me so much. I remember — I remember this chap reversing his bloody truck over these five Egyptians!

You see I have nothing to balance that memory.

Even on a transcript this piece retains the force of the spoken version, although the personal involvement and the tension generated by the stated dilemma at the end are more immediate and commanding of attention on the tape. It is a fine piece of oral literature for the classroom because of its genuine complexity. A human being is revealed naked in a series of events which years later still gnaw at him. His repeated 'sort of's, where he pushes a memory away or where he cannot, for the instant, get the right word to fit the memory, or his understating ('I don't know whether you've ever seen a trampled hedgehog') all emphasise his lack of sureness about the sets of incidents. Yet, in grappling with his wartime experience, he is desperately trying to force an order or balance. His only resources are the recollections of parallel (violent) incidents in childhood. The childhood section of the story, in some ways, is much surer. He admits that he can balance the horror of the dozens of mangled hedgehogs because he has the equally vivid, yet ordered, contrast of men seriously doing a job. Marvellously, the childhood recollection provides a symbolic and actual refuge as well — the stream — a physical retreat and place of safety. Significantly, he returns to the recollection of the stream at the end of the story. He is searching for a symbolic stream for the adult incident, but there he only has sand, a mingling of hands, soon to be severed and the mindless cruelty of the sergeant.

As a bonus, the story-event represents an exact model for what Gwyn Jones calls the 'fictive life', and how it impels creation. Jones writes about,

> compulsive imaginings . . . They are part of the fictive life which is more important to the author as author than the daily recitative [of events] . . . I am speaking, need I say, of imaginings of a longer haul and deeper reach than the transient day-dreams that make men groan and dogs whimper.*

'Memory is a fine oral re-creation of those moments which are significant for the creator and world-opening for the listener, especially for the young-adult listener.

*See the Introduction to Gwyn Jones' *Collected Short Stories*, (London, 1974) pp. vii-ix.

The Urban Tale:

The next transcript is an example of the impulse of pleasure in re-telling a story-event. It is also very much a part of an urban Australian tradition. The issues which this piece raises are wide-ranging and cannot be fully dealt with here, but they are central to the idea of performance. Performance-centred aspects of speech and story-telling, as opposed to conventional text-centred, is an area virtually ignored in English work.* This is an important reason why the quality of reading-competence is so poor. Sense of rhythm in speech seems to be lost on so many teachers and students, and this, I think, has two consequences. Firstly, it encourages only a partial awareness of the imaginative 'happenings' which occur in literature; secondly, it develops an attitude of joylessness towards words. If the monotone is normative then very quickly an impression is produced that all kinds of language, for different purposes, in differing contexts, require the same voice. Of course, the internal rhythms present in any piece of good prose tend naturally to resist such pressure, hence the seeming incoherence of much that teachers hear everyday, when listening to their students read aloud, when the two tendencies clash.

The 'pleasure-principle' in story-telling is much more than mere personal egocentric indulgence. It involves both conscious and intuitive sensibilities related to context, audience and words. It removes the text from the centre of consideration and puts it in the same plane as that of the language competence of the speaker-performer, and in that of the interplay between the changing expectations of speaker and listener. This performance-centred approach to literature is closely linked to rhetorical theory and is a way of describing what happens when a teacher (performer) teaches a class (audience). Since no one teacher can take unto himself all roles and all experience, and because the school and the students could not cope with endless performances in the flesh from a multitude of different people, the classroom use of my tapes within the English lesson would help teachers to focus on 'verbal art'.†

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*Related language fields, however, have not ignored these areas. See, for example, Dell Hymes, 'The Contribution of Folk-Lore to Sociolinguistic Research', in *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 84, no. 1, 1971; and Alan Lomax, *Folksong, Style and Culture* (New York) 1968.

†For an excellent discussion on this see R. Baumann, 'Verbal Art as Performance', in *American Anthropologist*, vol. 77, no. 2, 1975, pp. 290-311.

THE DOLE PAYMENT*

When I was going back to Wonthaggi I went to get my dole, like everybody else did, when I went to get it Mr Stevens, who was the town clerk he says, 'Yours has not been passed'. I said, 'Mine hasn't been passed', and he sa.., 'No, they haven't sent yours through'. Well, it was about 34/6 I think at that time and I sat in the old park down near the Post Office. I said, how in the devil can I go home to my wife without the 34/6. Anyway I said, steady down, stop worrying, stop getting worried, and I went back to the town clerk about an hour later. 'No. It hasn't come through Edi', he said, 'hasn't come through'. And I sat there again and I said, I can't go home to the wife. Don't know what to do. I'll go down and see Idris. He was president of the miners union and I thought, he'll help . . . he'll guide me.

So I went down and Idris said, "Good stuff! great stuff!' He says, 'Good stuff! This is what I want. An ex-miner out of work due to the Depression has been refused his dole because he took a militant line in the Woodside struggle'. He said, 'This'll do us. Next Sunday we'll call a public meeting and lay it before the people. This is what I've been waiting for, for years.'

And I looked at him and I wasn't so clever them days and I thought, it might sound all right to him, but it doesn't get me 34/6 for tonight.

So I went back in and I thought I'll have one more look at Stevens — and I went in to him and I said to Mr Stevens, 'Has it come in yet?' He said, 'No'. This was about half past four — quarter to five. He said, 'No, Ed', he said, 'it hasn't come through'. And I said, 'Oh well', I said, 'I'll just have to go along with what Idris said'. And he said, 'Idris? What do you mean?'. And I said, 'I went down and seen Idris, president of the union and I told him what had happened and I said I'd been refused my dole and I told him I was at Woodside and told him the story. He said, 'That's putting the dirt into you'. He said, 'You did?' and I said, 'Yeh'. And he said, 'And what else?', and I said, 'Well he's going to call a public meeting on Sunday and let all the people around here know what happened to an ex-miner because he took a militant stand on behalf of his comrades'. He says, 'You did?'. He says, 'Wait a minute'. He said, 'Wait a minute, don't go away. Stand there'. And he went into the office and anyhow he come back. 'It's come through, just come through.' And anyhow he give me the money and he said, 'Do you want a pair of boots? Do you want a couple of shirts?' because they had the privilege of handing out some of the clothing — and I got something for the missus, something for the kids.

When I went back and told Idris he blew the top. He said, 'You sacrificed your struggle for 34/6 — for a pair of boots and a couple of shirts'.

In several ways I regard this piece as a model of oral literature because it presents so many levels, particularly in 'performance', and more will be said of this later. As a piece of literature, the interest lies in the way the character presents himself. Despite the artful self-deprecations: 'I wasn't so clever them

*I have used this example before, in a different context. See P. Moss, 'The Writing Model and Literature', in *English in Australia*, no. 30, 1975, pp. 44-52.

days'; 'Don't know what to do'; the confusion on being refused the payment; the mock fear at having to return home to his wife without any money; he presents a shrewd intelligence at work, plotting every move consciously and skilfully. The whole creation is a brilliant piece of delayed comic drama, delayed because full realisation by the audience cannot occur until that final, hilarious scene. Only then do the incidents fit into place. The consciousness in the creation is striking. It is clear that in performance the incident is simultaneously being savoured, relived and teasingly dangled before the audience.

The language is a minor study in itself, but one example must be stressed: the mock-biblical undertones are perfectly balanced with the relative insignificance of the issue — a postponement of thirty-four and six payment. 'He'll guide me'; 'We'll . . . lay it before the people' are fine touches which help towards the climax when a 'struggle' is 'sacrificed' for clothing.

The Confession Tale:

I want, now, to look at a transcript which illustrates the kind of situation that never gets into the conventional classification of literature because it is, in itself, so slight — a mere bald recounting of a very personal incident. I include it as an example of an oral-literature type which, in my view, does claim our attention. It could be called a confession story.

FEAR

I'm going to talk about a time — let's see — about 1961 — during the summer when I was at college — and it was the year after I finished college. Like all students leaving college I was broke — no money — so I decided to go and look for work. I got a job at a meat factory, where they make pork pies and sausages and bacon. Now I was signed on to the heavy gang and the heavy gang was the one that did the heavy work not the one that weighed the most. It was a group of chaps involved in hooking and unloading stuff going in and out of the factory. Our job every day was to unload the freshly-killed carcasses of pigs from the slaughter house and the packaging materials that come in from other factories. Other things, too — spices, salt and other meat — lamb and beef.

Now I think there was six or seven of us involved in this unloading and this was on the ground floor but all the meat factory section was upstairs. There were two methods of getting the meat upstairs. The first was on a moving rail which went up to the three floors above; the other method was by using a lift. Everything was put in wooden pallets — wooden platforms about five feet square — and these were lifted by fork-lift trucks. These are a method of carrying heavy loads without hurting yourself. Now a pallet would be loaded with blocks of ice, say, and this would be taken upstairs to the refrigeration department on the lift. The chaps who worked the lift — there were two of them — they were members of the heavy gang too but they never did any of the work. They were special 'lift men'.

Now one of these chaps was a very old man. He was about three hundred years old, actually. Tremendously characterful — very lined and wizened old face and he never said anything. Blank eyes, expressionless eyes, and you can presume the job had done that — I think — unless he decided to be a lift man because he had expressionless eyes. Because the inside of the lift was completely blank — it was a huge metal box about 12 foot square. It was grey and the floor was metal and roof was metal and the walls were metal. They were scratched and banged and bruised and bent and scratched.

Now one day — this particular lift man — I think he was called Charlie — he was off sick and it was known that he wouldn't be coming back for days and I was requested to take his place. It wasn't so much a request — it was an order — so I went to work the lift. The lift worked by pulling the two doors which were vertical. Well, one door descended from the top and other one came up from the bottom and they met in the middle with a resounding metallic echo — and you pulled them together by using a tool which was identical to a window pole — which you have in schools — and it was about half a length.

Now the job scared me silly. I have never been known to have claustrophobia but I got it that day when I went in to work this lift. The continual procession up and down of this metal box was like being buried alive — because you never saw the daylight from the moment you went in to the moment you came out — there was no possibility of seeing daylight inside the factory. And hour after hour I was up and down with this lift and the fork lift with the freshly killed pork, or the ice or the boxes of eggs or the barrels of lard. Up and down all the time. It drove me mad! I couldn't stand it. And I had to be taken off it because I felt I might start using that door pole for a reason it wasn't intended. It really felt like a living death — up and down in the muted box all day. Very terrifying. I was frightened. I didn't like it. And I wouldn't go back either. And although I was sort of ridiculed and mocked for being a bit stupid because everybody else wasn't bothered, I couldn't do it again despite ridicule.

I suspect that this event would hold interest for teenagers as an example of fear courageously faced in the telling. It affords, in addition, an instructive contrast with 'Memory'. Whereas in 'Memory' the events could not be controlled by the teller because of the indiscriminate intrusion of outside forces, in 'Fear' the experience, though painful, is successfully handled because it is absolutely private and uninterrupted. In a sense, of course, the situation is now successfully handled because he doesn't conquer his fear. But the ending of the piece is a claim to victory because it emphatically reveals self-knowledge, openly admitted. The understatements at the end serve to emphasise this.

Another strength in 'Fear' is the concreteness of the details, felicitous touches in the context. The scene is set quickly and deftly; and the simple details in the first half of the piece, while apparently being no more than objective scene-setting are, in fact, the necessary preliminary construction for the teller's own predicament. The climax of the event is really his own (non) identity in the metal lift as a parallel to the packaged carcasses he is moving. The repetitions, the non-character of the 'characterful' old man, all play their part in the conscious simplicity of an event in whose telling there is an admission and an affirmation — an admission of a past fear and an affirmation of personal toughness.

In using the term, 'oral tradition', I am open to the legitimate demand that I make clear the nature and authenticity of it. 'The Dole Payment' is part of that tradition of the trade-union struggle, of the little man alone against authority. The labour movement is rich in personalised histories of this type. But there is an older tradition in this country, centred around the shearers and stockmen of Queensland and New South Wales, which has produced distinctive

tales with a strong rural flavour. Put briefly, it is a frontier tradition and some of its mythical characters have direct links with Paul Bunyan and that American-West, tale-spinning convention of the nineteenth-century – exaggeration. I suppose a 'character' such as Bill Wannan's 'Crooked Mick of the Speewah' is the Australian version of Bunyan. Bill Wannan and Alan Marshall have set down many of the tales and stories of this kind. However, little of it is available as audio material, and where it is available it is produced by professionals in performance.* I have been collecting versions of this tradition from people who have learned it orally from fathers and grandfathers. An element of spontaneity has therefore been retained and this is well preserved in the freshness and vigour of some of the tellings. The following is such a tale – the frontier type of wild, enjoyable exaggeration.

*See Bill Harney and Alan Marshall, Talkabout on Score, Pol. 017.

The Frontier Tale:

QUEENSLAND FARMING — CORN AND PUMPKINS

Apparently he had gone up towards Northern Queensland, in back of Cairns actually, and he'd bought this block of land, a couple of thousand of acres, and the bloke who was selling it praised it to the skies. Oh, great bit of land, beautiful bit of land, loam twenty feet deep, wonderful stuff. And this guy's a bit surprised you know, that he got this block of land, this fantastic bit of soil for so little and he didn't realise why. And the bloke he had bought it from had put up a hut there and he moved into the hut.

It was about November, just before the rains, and he was wondering what he ought to plant there, to sort of get him through the wet season until he could get a bit of a crop together and make a bit of money to buy some seed and branch out, make a bit of money, a living for himself, and he decided to plant corn and pumpkins. So he bought himself some corn seed and pumpkin seed and he went out and worked the soil a bit. Harrowed it and ploughed it.

One day he was sitting around the camp and this storm cloud started coming down from the north and he thought, right, today's the day, I better get it done today. I'll go out and plant it all. But the storm cloud got him by surprise really because it was coming down a lot quicker than he thought it was. And he reckoned I'll never get around the whole lot on foot and he had a bright idea. He got this old grey horse of his (he was riding it actually when I met him), and he put a bag of corn seed on one side of the saddle and a bag of pumpkin seed on the other side, and he thought I'll just race up and down the paddock and plant it from the back of the horse. Just throw the seed out and the rain will come down and it'll all sink in and she'll be sweet. So he piled on to the horse and away he sailed at a brisk canter up and down the flat. Pumpkin seed to the right, corn seed to the left, and pumpkin seed to the right and corn seed to the left. Once up this main paddock and once back down and as he was going up the third time he heard this rustling and crackling behind him. He turned around and lo and behold the pumpkins had all sprouted and the corn had all sprouted, and she was all growing at a rate of knots. The corn he'd first planted was about eighty feet high and the pumpkins were after him. They were spreading like wild fire, going crazy they were, and they were right behind him. And he spurred his horse up and he's throwing pumpkin seeds to the right, corn seeds to the left and pumpkin seeds to the right and the pumpkins, they're catching up on him, you know.

This beautiful soil, they just landed on the soil and took root and went mad, and they're right after him, and the pumpkin tentacles are reaching

out to grab him from the horse. He thought I'll give this away. He jumped off his horse. There was a corn stalk just next to him from the last row so he started shooting up this cornstalk. He found after a while that he didn't need to climb. If he just sat in one place he would go up at a rate of knots, so he was going up climbing about fifty feet a minute and the pumpkins were after him still, climbing up the corn stalk after him and he pulled out his Joe Baker knife, and he was slashing away at the pumpkin tentacles and they're trying to pull him down out of the corn plant and he's trying to stay up there.

Had a hell of a time for a while he reckons and eventually they withdrew in disgust so he sat up there for a while and he thought, gawd what will I live on? Course, pumpkin, corn. So he moved around the corn stalk a bit and climbed up to a big corn cob.

Each kernel was about six inches through the middle and he was getting a regular meal out of them. And he was up there for about a week and the rains were coming, but he was all right, like he just pulled some corn leaves over him and he wouldn't get wet. Then the main lot of the rains gave over and the country started to dry out. He was still living up there and the pumpkin tentacles are still going mad down the bottom, and the corn's still growing. He was about three hundred or four hundred feet straight up by now. The corn had slowed down a bit after the first two hundred or three hundred feet. He was about three hundred and fifty feet he reckoned and the country had started to dry out. Still a bit of rain about, but not much.

One day he's just sitting up there and he smelt this smoke, and he looked down at the bottom of the corn plant and the pumpkin tentacles were rubbing against each other trying to create a spark to set the corn plant on fire, so they could get him you see. And he, you know, he was getting rather worried. He was signing his Will and Testament and giving himself up to his maker, and this little cloud come past and he grabbed it and wrung it out and put out the fire. He was safe for a while. He was up there for about three months he reckoned and every now and then the pumpkins would try and get him again and he'd be fighting them off with his knife and every now and then they'd try to burn him and he'd grab hold of a little cloud and wring it out and put out the fire.

Came about April, and it started to dry out a bit and the pumpkins started to die off. He waited another couple of weeks and he thought I'll give it away, I'll get back down. So he climbed back down, struggled through this great mountain of dead pumpkin leaves and dead pumpkin tentacles. He thought, gawd, struth, where's me horse? He thought the pumpkins must've got it you see. He's hunting around, walks into this great big green wall and he thought good lord what's this and he walks around it and it was a bloody pumpkin. It was about thirty feet high and eighty feet through the middle. Good Lord he said. Struth, and he walked around it a bit further and he saw this great big hole in the side of it. I wonder what's in there. Looked in. Couldn't see nothing. Black as anything. Pulled out some vespers and struck one. Right down the bottom of a long tunnel he could see this greyish thing. He thought it was a ghost, and it whinnied and he thought, no it's not a ghost it's me bloody horse. The horse had burrowed into the pumpkin you see, and had lived there during the wet season when the pumpkins were after him.

This is a tale full of fanciful delights which, once disbelief is suspended, can be totally enjoyed. And not the least part of the pleasure is gained from recognition of the efforts made by the teller to dispel the fiction. The references at the beginning and the end to the horse which, 'he was riding . . . actually, when I met him', is the most outrageous effort in this regard. Despite the relative age of this story (and the 'Jack and the Beanstalk' connection is an element here), the form of its images is very modern indeed. For me, it has the breathless haste and 'bizarrerie' of the cartoon film. The sinister and phenomenal growth of the plants; the tendrils creating fire from their friction; the wringing out of passing clouds to make rain; the house from a leaf. Detail upon detail in rapid succession, but quite vivid and appropriate in context produce this modern effect. Further impact is gained by the skilful narrative pace which the teller creates (apparent even in the transcript), with the strategically-placed action phrases such as, 'rustling and crackling behind him'; 'spreading like wildfire'; 'at a rate of knots'. Obviously, the tape itself has to be heard before the full effect of the tale-teller manipulating pauses and repetition can be appreciated, but there is enough here to indicate the value and use which tales like these could have in the classroom — as part of an oral literature.

The Work Tale:

In my view the greatest difficulty to be faced in teaching is the fragmented nature of society in general, which, in turn, is reflected in the schools' curricula. The loss of a centre in English teaching is a consequence of this lack of cohesion. The mechanical media, with their built-in policies of cynicism and triviality, and their quite deliberate prostitution of words, are our biggest threat. The toughest opposition which can be offered against an 'ersatz' culture is that of a vital culture. An oral tradition and its literature, properly used, can fulfil that requirement. This next piece is a good example of what I'm getting at, a story-event full of interest in itself and located firmly in the oldest and best tradition — that of pride in work.

THE BLACK SWAN OF CUMBY

I knew one — Slim Wells. He's probably two or three years older than me and I was horse-breaking with him for a while; he's a bit rough as a horse-breaker but he'd ride anything with fur on and that's for sure. And he used to get on a horse that people would say it's an outlaw; the truth is not everybody there was game to get on the horse since it was broken in because it threw the horse-breaker two or three times, nobody is going to ride it. Now Slim would jump on it and grab both reins, he'd be wearing a good pair of willoughbies or something similar and he'd whack it in the guts with the willoughbies and jam the thumbs fair into the shoulders and say guess who's got you, you bitch, and it could do what it liked. Now it had no hope of throwing him — short of throwing itself down. I saw him ride one on Cumby Station called Black Swan and this was . . .

It's really a story on its own and it's quite hilarious. He had this young horse he'd broken in and he was schooling it quite well for a change. He seemed to be in one of his better phases of horse-breaking where he seemed to have learned something along the line somewhere, and he was doing the right thing for a change. He had this thing beautifully rugged up every night. He was feeding it grain, you know, oats and stuff and kept it stabled. It was his real pet. It was a chestnut gelding. Now it was as fast as lightning you know, and it was real quick on the turn, turn on a sixpence and all this sort of thing, and he was really kind to it, you know.

We were all having drinks one night and there was a big mad Irishman there and the talk got going about this outlaw mare, the Black Swan, renowned. Everybody for miles about knew the Black Swan of Cumby and nobody had ridden her since the horse-breaker got thrown three or four times, the minute the mare got out of the big yard. He said let her out of the big yard and that was it *pinggg*. Off he went, you know in a big heap

in the dirt. So Slim said, 'Listen I can ride the Black Swan', you know he said, 'I haven't seen a horse yet that I couldn't get on'. Paddy said 'well you won't stay very long on this one. She's a real outlaw you know'. 'Fair enough', said Slim. 'That's it', [drunken voice], 'Come on, because I'm full of rum'.

So he raced up the stables. He grabbed his little favourite chestnut and he said, you grab old Pinky. This big old, real pink-looking colour, you know, horse. Great looking thing about sixteen hands, a massive horse, and it stood out like a big pink rose in the moonlight. You know, this is three o'clock in the morning. Drinking and talking and general rowing had been going on. So we grabbed these two and we went to muster the main horse paddock and about quarter past three, jingle, jangle, jingle, jangle I heard some horse bells start up at the bottom corner and I'd started my mob off and they were running ahead of me, and I stayed back and I heard this jingle jangle coming up the fence. I thought, good! Slim's got his, you know half, because they used to generally split into a couple of mobs and graze at different ends of the paddock. I raced ahead of my mob and opened the gate and circled back and my mob slipped in and I tied the horse up and waited behind the gate so that these moonlight shadows and things wouldn't startle anything coming up the south fence. The next thing jingle, jangle, jingle, all these bloody horse bells coming up the fence frightened the bloody horse you see. In they went and I shut the door behind them. No Slim. Well about ten minutes later Slim come jogging up on his little pony and I said, 'What happened to you, you're a bit late'. He said, 'Yes, the pony ran under a low limb and clobbered me you see and the next thing I knew I must've got knocked out, because I woke up on the broad of me back with me arms stretched out holding on to one rein and the horse blowing snot all over my face, going *brrr*. 'So', he said 'I got up and here I am'. So O.K. Fair enough. He said 'Did the Black Swan come in?' And I said 'Yeh she's here'. 'Right, we'll sort her out', he said, 'We'll draft her off, get the rest out of the way.'

Half the station must've been awake by this time, you know, but nobody came near us. No one would come within coo-ee of us. They were scared of Slim. He had a bit of a reputation as a wild man. Anyway we finally drafted her off and she stood in the middle of the yard blowing madly, down through the nose and then she quietened off a bit. So he threw his saddle on her and he said, 'I don't know. I don't like this saddle much'. I said, 'Do you want to use mine?' and he said 'Yeh. I'll use yours,' he said. 'You better hurry up,' he said. I said 'Why?'. He said, "All the rum's running out of me.' He said, 'I won't get on shortly'. So I grabbed the saddle and he wheeled — he hadn't tightened it up you see, and I had the bays girth, a big red-eyed thing, with a number of turns and you just hook it up and you just go 'whoof' like this you see, jump away from them for about two yards and it tightens up as you jump past and the horse goes 'whoof' like this. It drags the horses chest right in close and it can buck, but it won't get rid of the saddle you see. While you're fiddling about trying to do buckles up on an ordinary saddle, the horse can blow itself out or jump around you got no hope but with this one, just one reef and the things up tight, so beauty. So he did this and he said guess who's got you, you bitch? She had this bay's girth you see and she went "whooeeee". She squealed and she dived around the yard about half a dozen times and he said well that'll help to cool you off. A number of suitable bad words to

accompany it and he stood there, grabbed the horse, caught her again, and we stood in the yard and I said 'Do you want a hand?' And he said, 'No. I'll be right.' He said, 'If I don't get on soon, I'll never get on'. He said, 'I'm starting to get the shakes'. I said 'Go on, get on, be a devil.' So he slipped the border and again he gave a great coo-ee. 'Whooee, guess who's got you', and he jammed the thumbs into the shoulder and she just went mad. She gave a great squeal and leapt about three or four feet in the air and took off around the yard. A series of gigantic leaps and then she sort of stopped and wheeled around, and it was only a small round yard and she went *binggg* about three hits across the other side of the yard with her head down, and she went *wack*, she hit the head. She must have hit the pole on the rails and she slowly leaned back on her haunches and rolled over quietly to one side and flaked. And Slim's underneath yelling out blue murder and saying, 'Get the bitch off me! She's broken me back. Ow me arm, ow me back, ow me shoulder'. All this caper. I walked up and I said, 'Are you really hurt?'. The horse came too, so he didn't really need to reply. He was a little bit shocked. The rum had really been blown out of him by this time. She staggered slowly to her feet and sort of walked off around the yard and he said, 'That'll do her for tonight', he said, 'I'll ride her again in the morning'. I thought yeh, I'll have to see this.

Anyway he got up early before anybody else and he rode that horse. He got on it and apparently from what he said, it bunged on a bit of a turn but he rode a couple of paddocks down, maybe three or four miles he reckoned. And all the way back again he flattened it in the soft going, sort of a soft sandy, a big boggy going. He flattened it, and this thing must've been up to its belly at times in it, because all this country was wet around here in a lot of places and great holes would be there. You'd step over the edge and you'd go over out of sight and water would come up, *brrrr* straight through your nose and he took her through all this kind of garbage, and of course she was terrified of him by the time they got back. The manager come up. Time to start work, I woke up a bit bleared eyed and said to Slim 'Are you going to ride the mare this morning?'. He said, 'I've already ridden the bitch'. He said, 'She's no outlaw, anymore'. So anyway the manager came up, said 'Did Slim ride the black mare last night?'. I said, 'Yes, the Black Swan?'. He said, 'Yeh, that's the one, she's an outlaw you know'. I said, 'Not any longer'.

This is another story of character, of bravado, but Slim's adventure is not a mindless ostentation. Because what comes through, even in transcription, is a way of life and it is communicated not by sociological inventory but indirectly through the teller's pride in, and knowledge of, ranch work. Although Slim's personality and his struggle with the outlaw horse ostensibly is the centre of the story, the real vitality comes out incidentally in the way that the teller interrupts the narrative to include details of work-life. For example, the description of strapping up the girth, and the little aside when he explains how they used to split up the horses at mustering time. This sense of a particular kind of life being lived-through-work is brought into Slim's character when, near the beginning, the way he looked after his pony is described. That detail has two functions. Firstly, it helps to round out Slim — he's not merely a drunken braggart. Secondly, it is a bond of recognition and a mark of approval from the

teller. Indeed, the whole story is about a human being valuing and assessing another human being, not against an abstract code but against a shared set of work values, which have the effect of assessing the work of a man by the way he does his job. It is this kind of readily communicable seriousness, from everyday reality, that is missing from much classroom work.

Death Tales:

The classic oral traditions, in all cultures, are concerned with birth, death, joy, tragedy, disaster – all-encompassing events and states of mind that impinge on the individual and his culture directly and powerfully. The most intractable subject is death, which is rarely treated convincingly in literature.* Consequently, the task in the classroom is made harder especially when the media totally ignore the reality of death. It is largely a result of the way people are assaulted so relentlessly by the media's sobbing, phantasmagoric versions of mortality that the following hits one with such a welcome freshness and simple, decent power.

DEATH

Death? I haven't got close to. Not even as far as other people are concerned. Strangely enough, early childhood memories I have are quite closely associated with death. I had, but I wouldn't think of having now, the right sort of clothes to wear for a funeral. I had a black little hat which had bright trimmings for Sunday, and these were changed to something dark when one of my quite numerous uncles died, which often seemed to happen in this period of perhaps eight to twelve years old. So perhaps I was quite close to death because I certainly attended quite a lot of funerals and I certainly felt quite strongly about it, and I can remember the procession, the service, the cars. Horses? I'm not sure whether I can remember back that far. No, I think it was just cars. And of course the grave, and the handful of earth being thrown on to the coffin. Yes that was a moving experience. But they were still fairly remote to me, these uncles and aunts, my father was one of fourteen, and many of his brothers and sisters died in this period. But perhaps more affecting to us, more immediately affecting, would be when a favourite cat or dog died, or was run over.

As time went by an uncle I had been close to became sick, died slowly in the hospital with what was an unmentionable disease. Cancer. I can

*I acknowledge any objection to the word 'convincingly'. How can anyone judge what is convincing about death? But I'm thinking of the kind of concreteness in Claudio's speech in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* Act 3, Sc. 1, lines 117-31; and one or two of Bernard Malamud's stories, e.g. 'The Mourners' in *The Magic Barrel*. (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 21-30. Both these writers created against the backgrounds of living and rich traditions.

remember then going in to see him because I would stay for long periods with this aunt and uncle, and I was very fond of Uncle Ted but I was locked in reserve and he was almost unconscious. Beyond speech, almost beyond movement and I stood there. I was older then but I wasn't able to stretch out my hand, and to take his and he wasn't able to offer it, but I knew he wanted me to take it.

What I find impressive about this piece is the total honesty. There is no conventional attitudinising or sentimentality, and half of the piece admits confusion, even embarrassment. One of the good things is the sense of aliveness, despite the subject, an aliveness transmitted through the shifts of memory occurring before the reader/listener. What they do to the piece is to involve changes of perspective. The important shift is between the opening, with its avowal of a lack of understanding, and the close where, despite an inability to reach out and touch, there is still recognition: 'but I knew he wanted me to take it'. Another important vitality is contained in the struggle of trying to reconcile the adult awareness that appropriate attitudes should have been assumed in childhood, with the actual business as it was. And 'as it was' reflects the natural reactions of childhood — to remember objects, concrete details which stuck in the memory, 'the handful of earth being thrown onto the coffin'.

The simple power of this piece can only be gained from listening because it is spoken in an even, subdued tone in which the pressure of feeling is indicated through pauses and silences — particularly in the marvellous opening: 'Death? I haven't got close to'. The measured, sure narrative and the occasional fine image ('locked in reserve'; 'beyond speech, beyond movement'), when presented with that tone, convince the listener that he is witnessing a genuine and powerfully affecting communication.

Death, in literature, is not always tragic, of course. I suppose that an oral literature is uniquely able to present facets of death, if that is the term, because of the 'performance' factor involved. What I mean is that filters are slotted between the stark tenor of the subject and its realisation in the listener. Written language can do this as well, but an oral performance can easily and with immediacy deflect, even distort, expectation. This next transcript illustrates this very well for, in parts, the enormity of the event is lessened by an attitude bordering on the burlesque.

THE DEATH OF JOHNNY AH KEE

Outside Dalton up near the Carnarvon Ranges there, in the 1920s, there were two characters had selections there. One was an Aussie-born German descendent called Otto Schneider* and half-way between his selection and Dalton, a Chinese, or half-Chinese bloke called Johnny Ah Kee, also had a selection. So Otto Schneider's habit was to ride into Dalton once a month and pick up hard rations. He'd stay there for three days and get blind drunk, and then ride back. On the way in, he'd call in at Johnny Ah Kee's place, at his hut and they'd have a billy of tea and a bit of damper, and real old rough stuff, have a bit of a yarn and Otto would ride into Dalton.

*Fictitious names are used in this transcript.

So on this particular occasion something went wrong and, at about just on dark at the police station at Dalton, Otto sings out, 'Are you there sergeant?' And the sergeant comes out and looks around, and drooped across the withers of Otto Schneider's horse is a body, and it's the body of Johnny Ah Kee. So the sergeant is quite upset and he says, 'Yeh, we'll get him off'. So they take the body off and put it in the lock up — or somewhere. He said, 'Well you better tell me the story'. 'Well', he said, 'I come through there today and I usually have a billy of tea with Johnny'. He said, 'When I got there he was lying flat on his back outside the hut, dead'. 'Jesus' he said. 'And you brought him in fifteen miles on a horse?'. 'Yeh', he said. 'But Jesus', he said, 'He'd weigh about fourteen stone'. 'Yeh', he said 'I knew that of course. I had to gut him first'.

So the sergeant suddenly realises he's got a bit of a problem on his hands. He said, 'Now what are you going to do Otto?'. He said, 'I'm going around the pub. I'll put me horse in the stables and I'll just box on today and tomorrow'. So the sergeant gets a bit upset, a bit worried and he rings up the inspector in Toowoomba, and tells him what his problem is, that he's got a corpse on his hands and the corpse has been disembowelled and so and so. So the inspector blows his top. He says, 'Do you realise what you've got on your hands? You've got an unsolved crime on your hands'. He says, 'Somebody brings in a body', blah, blah, blah. He says, 'You've got to go out — tell this bloke Otto Schneider', he said, 'to go out and get the contents of his stomach where he disembowelled him'. So the sergeant goes round to the pub and Otto is boozing on. So he puts it to him and he says, 'No, you got to go Otto'. And he gets a canvas bag from the PMG Department or somewhere, some water-tight bag. He said, 'Otto you've just go to do it. First thing tomorrow morning go out. This is an unsolved crime'. He said, 'We're in trouble. I'm in trouble. You're in trouble. The police inspector is in trouble, everybody's in trouble'. So Otto, much against his will, rides off at daybreak on the Satt .day morning. Rides out fifteen miles. So he's back about four o'clock in the afternoon and there's the PMG mail bag tied on the dees of his saddle. Nothing in it. And the sergeant said, 'Didn't you get it?'. 'No', he said. 'It's all fixed', he said, 'All fixed', he said, 'clear case of poisoning'. He said, 'When I got there, there was no guts left, but there were four dead dingoes'. *(laughter)*.

The arresting aspect of this story-event is the grossness of the tale coupled with the over-all understating. The horror of 'I had to gut him first' is lost in the telling because it is slipped into the narrative almost as an aside. In fact, the impression made in the piece is one of narrative reserve, things possibly being withheld. This is reinforced by the questions which bristle around the episode. Is the enigmatic Schneider sinister? Perhaps the clue is that he regularly gets 'blind drunk'? Why is the policeman so incompetent? It is a very strange tale indeed and the ending merely deepens the mystery.*

* There is a similar kind of story by Ernest Hemingway, who wrings a lot of irony out of his narrative but leaves the reader groping for ways to handle the quite extraordinary death. See 'An Alpine Idyll', in *Men Without Women*, (Harmondsworth, 1955), pp. 130-7.

As far as my original point is concerned, what should be noted are the narrative filters — pushing away the horrid death and the possible implications. After revealing what he'd done Otto is asked by the policeman, 'Now what are you going to do, Otto?'. He said, 'I'm going around the pub'. And later, when the same policeman has been reprimanded by the inspector, we are treated to something bordering on vaudeville monologue, 'This is an unsolved crime . . . We're in trouble. I'm in trouble. You're in trouble. The police inspector's in trouble. Everybody's in trouble.'

Almost the stand-up comedian's patter, and a clever distraction at that. But it is achieved at a cost, for we are never quite sure just where the line of sympathy lies. That is a worrying thing in an event such as this. Certainly, it lays the whole performance open to the charge of a lack of seriousness. However, it does not invalidate it as an example of story-telling.

30

Life Tale:

My final example of oral literature, within the tradition, is one which takes a steady look at a life and presents it simply, unaffectedly but with a strong, quiet power. It is a lady reviewing the significance of her emigration to Australia when she was a young woman.

JOURNEY TO AUSTRALIA

I've been thinkin', what's been significant in my life: there's been so many things. I suppose I've had quite a full life really, but one of the most significant things, I think, although I wasn't aware of it at the time, was when I emigrated to Australia. We were quite happy workin' in London but bein' young we had itchy feet and wanted to see more of the world. My friend and I both wanted to go to Canada for preference and then South Africa, and although both these countries were admitting migrants we had to pay the full fare which was forty pounds and more than we could afford at the time. Australia offered us a two year workin' holiday for ten pounds which we could just about manage. I loved the trip out; it was one of the most wonderful times of my life. I've often wished I could re-live it. I've been home twice since but nothing was like the first trip.

What impressed me most when I arrived in Sydney were the people; they were so free, so confident in themselves — arrogant perhaps you could call it . . . not that I'd really call it that now but we did then. Nothing worried them; they weren't afraid of anyone. Well when you've been brought up in a village as I had been to . . . brought up from a time I was very young to think that when I left school the best I could hope for in life was to become a very good servant and perhaps one day I might marry — perhaps a miner, or something like that — and — it's very difficult to take the attitude that they had. I know my first job at home in Longleat House, I was there for over twelve months and never once was I called by my first name. It was always 'Thomas do this. Thomas come here. Thomas you're off now'. Sometimes they used to forget I had a first name. Well, this isn't very good for your confidence. It's inclined to make you feel a bit inferior. Of course I always thought that people that were a little bit above me in life were my superiors, and to see the people of Australia talkin' to their superiors as though they were equals came as a bit of a shock.

We managed to get a job in Canberra at the Hotel Canberra. We were waitresses there and at the time it was the leading hotel and most of the politicians used to stay there. Sir Robert Menzies was a frequent visitor to

the hotel as was Arthur Fadden. Another resident of the hotel at the time was Billy Hughes who is the first Welsh Prime Minister, though for Australia — I think he is the only one. He's rather old, a bit trying at times but a dear man and he showed an awful lot of interest in us. I think I gained a lot from him but most of the other politicans treated us well. They used to converse with us, asked us what we thought, listened to our opinions which rather surprised us — we always thought superiors never listened to our views and one politician, who shall remain nameless, sent a government car around for us one morning and gave us a personal guided tour of Government House which we thought was very nice.

I think that it was from this time that I began to realize that I didn't have to be a servant of the people; that I wasn't servile; that I possibly had as much to offer as anyone else and thinkin' like this it gave me confidence in myself and I think it was from then that I became a person — not that anything earth-shaftering happened when I discovered this. I didn't suddenly discover that I was very talented or anything. It was just that I was able to hold my own and become a person. I don't think I've ever looked back since then.

I think that this is a fine piece of realistic self-reflection that would be an excellent offering for adolescents. The undertow of doubt and feelings of inferiority would have immediate appeal, and it represents the lived experience of change, of significant change, without any accompanying self-dramatisation. The strength of character implied in, '. . . . I became a person — not that anything earth-shattering happened when I discovered this. I didn't suddenly discover that I was very talented or anything. It was just that I was able to hold my own and became a person.' is both impressive and also human in scale.

There are other good things. I like the understating of names. This issue is a difficult and significant language subtlety but her understatement of it does not result in any loss of impact. But the best moment in the piece is the marvellous semantic deflection from 'servant' to 'servile'. That is a shaping moment which at one stroke captures the complete significance, for this lady, of her journey to Australia. It is worth noting that this extract deals with matters which have been picked over *ad nauseam* by educationists and by the publicist-exploiters of youth. This lady avoids the sterile jargon of 'self-concepts'; 'identity crisis'; 'cultural shock'; 'finding myself'; 'the pain of youth'; 'social class conflicts'. They are all there, of course, but there is no time to intellectually agonise over them in the business of life. This lady has gone through her own particular experiences; has come through at the other end and is able to present herself whole as a consequence.

The Classroom Context:

At this stage, in moving onto a discussion of the tradition as language, I have an impossible task trying to convey the significance of 'sound language' through its written form. For the purposes of this monograph I can only offer rather sketchy models. Detailed discussion must be postponed until I am in a position to report the experimental phase of this work with students in schools. No system exists for representing all the features of the spoken voice and spontaneous speech, when transcribed, has a bitty, almost 'illiterate' look about it.* The fact that most of the transcripts which I've made of the tapes read well, is just one indicator that the stories have been worked on and sometimes have been artfully polished.† However, it is only fair that I should try to give some indication of a story-event that was spontaneously recalled and had no print antecedents. I do this in order to show – somewhat starkly – the exact form of spontaneous speech. The particular example is extremely interesting as a document full of vital slang, which works perfectly, but needs the sound for its effect. In the final analysis, I think that I must admit that for full audience awareness, we should be both present when the story-event is told and also have some experience of 'swaggie' poker schools. In that sense the piece is limited in its implications and applications. In another sense, however, it is a good, suggestive example for one of Basil Bernstein's interesting insights. I quote from Bernstein's work before presenting the transcribed story:

> . . . we might be able to distinguish between two orders of meaning. One we would call universalistic, the other particularistic. Universalistic meanings are those in which principles and operations are made linguistically explicit, whereas particularistic orders of meaning are meanings in which principles and operation are relatively linguistically implicit. If orders of meaning are universalistic then the meanings are less tied to a given context. The meta-languages of public forms of thought as these apply to objects and persons realize meanings of a universalistic type . . . Where orders of meaning are particularistic, where principles are

*For a few sensible apologies about this see the Introduction in Harold Rosen's 'Language and Class Workshops', vol. 1, (London, 1974).

†I do not intend, here, to go into the issue of what is a genuine oral story. Many stories which are told of the 'Australian frontier' have been put down in book-form (Bill Wannan has published a number, for example), and then may have been read and retold by someone, with or without additions. For my argument, the fact that it might not have been transmitted orally and successively is of no significance. The spontaneity and purity might be called into question but the performance in relation to oral literature is not necessarily or inevitably violated.

linguistically implicit, then such meanings are less context independent and more context-bound, that is tied to a *local relationship and to a local social structure. Where the meaning system is particularistic, much of the meaning is embedded in the context and may be restricted to those who share a similar conceptual history.* * (my italics)

NEEDLES AND THE CARD GAME

I met a chap once in a train. We were sitting up in the train. I forget where we were going. It was a long distance. I got an idea it was going out to the Isa. It was between Charters Towers and Richmond. We were on the rattler and this chap always kept on with these cards and the chap with me, I didn't know who he was then, but since, I've found out. He worked for George Sawley and they called him Needles because he's sharp. And he kept pestering us to play poker. And I'm not a poker man and the other two or three blokes weren't interested. But he was one of those blokes, you've got to play with him. And at last this Needles rolled over on his swaggie and he says, 'Why can't you sit down and shut up, unless you want to play'. So he said, 'All right'. He called me Snowy. He didn't know me. He says, 'Do you want to play Snow?' and I said, 'Well all right if you,' – not that I was frightened of him – but we had to shut him up because he was making a nuisance of himself. I said, 'What's the bloody use of playing cards. We got no money'. 'We'll play for matches'. I said, 'All right'. So he said to one of the other blokes, 'Do you want to play?'. And the bloke said, 'Oh, all right. I'll make it. I'll be in it.' So he played. So there was four of us playing and as soon as this bloke Needles picked up – this bloke dealt and he was real flash with it, and he did this style here. Nobody said anything. But as soon as I seen Needles – not that I'm any judge but I noticed and the other bloke woke to it too. And this bloke with all the gab that wanted it, he was too dumb to see he was playing with a crackerjack. And as soon as I seen him run this thumb over like that and he flicked them back and he did the concertina, professionally. The other bloke looks across to me, and look at this bloke and he never registered then. But my instinct told me that he was queer and the other bloke woke up too and he just went bump, bump – the way he handled them, this Needles.

But I thought well if this bloke's a card player he'll wake up to this fellow, but he didn't. And it wasn't long before he had all his matches. What made me wake up after then that he'd played amongst card men before was he used that sign that I've seen in many men. I looked to him. And I thought, now this bloke's a crackerjack. If he does that in the game – and anybody that knows gambling that if it's on the nose the games on the nose. So I looked at this other chap and still no recognition come. So I thought to meself he's got no idea who he's playing with and I didn't know what to do but I think I had about half a box of matches. I said, 'Well listen, I can't go much on. These are all the matches I got'. And

*Basil Bernstein, *Class Codes and Control*, vol. 1, (London, 1971), p.199-200.

Needles said, 'Do you want some?'. I said, 'No'. Well the game went right through and he took everything off this bloke, the whole lot, and I think that the other bloke had a few, and I had a few and he still didn't know how it had come around. Anyway after the game was all over, and he said, 'just as well we wasn't playing for money, isn't it?' But he said, 'Yes.' And he said to Needles, 'Don't let them try you with money son'. Like that, real cocky. So I never said anything. But he shuffled in the game and he said, 'I'll play you for that hand'. And he picked them up and he had four aces and a king and he said, 'Hey!'. I thought there was going to be a stink. Suddenly he'd realised that Needles had given — just given him four aces and a king and he said, 'No, you gave me your matches back'. And he said, 'Don't ever fall for the trick', he said, 'That you think everybody you talk to can't play cards'. Well you've never seen such disgust on a bloke's face. He shut up from there on. We never heard a word from him, but I often thought if he'd a million dollars in money, he could've taken the lot off him.

But I found out some months later, it might've been twelve months after. I was in Toowoomba and blow me who should I see in George Sawley's but Needles. He was with the George Sawley group — there is a two-up group at the back of old Manhattan, not Manhattan, Manihams store, an empty room, that they turned into a two-up game and I met that Needles there and I said to one of the chaps, 'Who's that bloke?' and he said, 'That's Needles Bones'. I says, 'I've met him before'. And he looked up and he says, 'Hello Snow'. And he was playing, and Bluey Burke said, 'Do you know him?' And I said, 'Yeh'. He said, 'I thought you was a swaggie.' And I said, 'Well he was for a while'. And he said, 'Not for long, I bet.'

Granting the earlier comments, there is still enough in the transcript alone for this piece to serve as a mine of useful things for the language lesson. The evocative slang terms, especially the wide use of a language of noise and movement — 'rattler', 'crackerjack', 'real flash', all of which are close to the kind of daily experience of the tramps who rode the railway tracks. This immediately can lead into a discussion of codes; notions of appropriateness; and the larger tension between vividness and formal correctness. For teachers who regularly do battle with students over aspects of written and spoken language, this piece offers useful material as well. There are sections where the narrator's enthusiastic usage of third person pronouns, causes problems of identification for the listener reader. Tape and transcript together, therefore, would be ideal for lessons about language situation: language explicitness and implication; and as introduction for students' opportunity to examine their own (generally) context-bound language.

The relatively serious study, and use of, colloquial expressions is of very recent origin in schools but it is of limited helpfulness in the classroom, because of the shortage of examples of the language actually being used. Apart from the language of the streets which the students bring into the classroom there is virtually nothing that is not artificial. The oral-tradition tapes offer many examples of colloquial language-in-action. The fact that the tapes are largely monologue does not in any way reduce their value. Rather, this may add another dimension, that of eccentricity. And the more attention that can be directed at personal language and its effectiveness the better, particularly in

attempts to combat the bland triviality (at best) of the language of the media.

It has been my observation that a deal of the talk which goes on in the classroom stems from attempts to encourage students to express their ideas (occasionally!), and their feelings (often!). Clearly, this is legitimate, even laudable. But it certainly does not go far enough. Even the *Language Across the Curriculum* units tend to examine the language used in classrooms, rather than how teachers **might** use spoken traditions.* The ancient idea of rhetoric† may be a non-starter in our society, but there is nevertheless a need to direct some attention to the way people speak in their attempts to gain effects of one kind or another. Obviously, it is very difficult to show on the page how the tapes might be used in this context. However, I've prepared a short segment from 'The Dole Payment', to selectively illustrate what the teller does to gain some of his effects. I only demonstrate pitch and juncture between words.

. . . don't know what to do. ↓ I'll go down and see Idris → He was president of the miners union and I thought, ↓ 'He'll help, he'll guide me'.

So I went down and Idris said, 'Good stuff! Great stuff'. He says, 'Good stuff'. ↓ This is what I want. An ex-miner out of work due to the Depression has been refused his dole + because he took a militant line in the Woodside struggle.' He said, + 'This'll do us. Next Sunday we'll catch a public meeting and lay it before the people.' ↑ This is what I've been waiting for, for years.' ↑

And I looked at him + and I wasn't so clever them days + and I thought ↓ it might sound all right to him + but it doesn't get me thirty four and sixpence for tonight.

Key

(Junctures)	┼	a slight pause between words
	↑	rising juncture, as at end of statement
	↓	falling juncture, as at end of statement
	→	sustentional juncture between related statements
Pitch	⁄	rising, positive assertion
	\	falling
	⁄	rising, forceful exclaimer

*I must stress that the workers engaged in these units are 'limiting' their investigations to the current language of learning in various subjects and situations. My comment above is not a criticism of their approach. It is just a reflection of how far we have to go in our studies of the varieties of spoken language for and in the classroom.

†I am thinking of the view of rhetoric as the appropriate education for producing the man experienced, good and eloquent. See 'De Oratore' by Cicero, especially Book I.

This example can be explained in terms of pitch and stress. Other tapes provide a source for the dramatic sense, where critical information is withheld until the last moment. Yet others offer hypnotic language either through cunning repetition of key words, so that the listener is placed under the influence or, by self-indulgent hyperbole, where the narrator is transfixed. Most of the tapes offer good, preliminary material for the 'magical' power which words can generate.

Another interesting area where the tapes might be used with profit is in the teaching of Narrative for they represent small segments of life, dramatised in speech, and rarely lacking controlled shaping threads of action or of oral style. Because they are short, pointed and conscious productions, where form and performance match material, then they are excellent examples of traditional form, re-worked.

Finally, the range covered by these tapes both in subject matter and in style of presentation is so wide-reaching that the collection, in itself, is a tiny archive of 'Australian-ness' and not merely in language terms. It may be that this kind of material might help to re-shape in a more realistic way the lost material of non-fiction in our lessons. It is a fact that story-tellers belong to antiquity where they were heirs to, and later caretakers of, peasant traditions.* But there is still, in all of us, the urge to gossip; to retell anecdote; to announce and to confess ourselves; to contemplate our pasts. These are often despised language activities (Northrop Frye calls them 'squirrel chatter'), yet they are verbal acts which proclaim us as human beings; which reveal the pith and sap, and vinegar within. They are activities which we enjoy and, when listened to, we find interesting.

However, it must be acknowledged that the strengths which I have claimed for these recordings are often presented with an equal force in conventional literary forms and frequently are rendered more powerfully. The tapes are not meant to be substitutes for the written text, since that would deprive students of necessary engagement with potentially powerful influences, but they do offer complementary experience. They also represent something unique, practical demonstrations that ordinary, non-glamorous, recognisable citizens are capable of making meanings out of their experience; of sharing that experience through using language; of 'forcing' engagement in an audience by devices of linguistic use and of general presentation. In other words, the tapes are part of a submerged literature heretofore unnoticed by educationists. The brilliant and provocative Paul Goodman suggests a route worth taking:

> . . . I have suggested that the wisest method of exploring langugage is to analyze how it operates in actual concrete situations . . . This is similar to the literary analysis of particular works; and, as in literary criticism, conversations and discourses fall roughly into genres, such as small talk, intimate talk, gang talk, public exchange of information, talk of different social classes, poems, journalism, dialogue, neurotic verbalizing etc. Each of these might have, roughly, certain distinctive characteristics of pronunciation, grammar, lexicon, concreteness of denotation, assertion of

*There are still a few of the traditional story-tellers left in Southern Ireland. For transcribed collections which have become classics of their kind Peig Sayers, *An Old Woman's Reflections*, (London, 1962); and Maurice O'Sullivan, *Twenty Years A-Growing*, (London, 1953).

propositions, personal engagement of the speakers, modifying of the standard code, tone of voice, interplay of speaker and hearer etc. I may be mistaken, but I think that a reasoned description of such genres would tell us something about language that we have not been getting from linguists . . .'†

Obviously, I find this a compelling viewpoint and some of the tapes clearly cross Goodman's categories although no detailed description of any of them has been attempted in this report. It is worth noting that an omission from his list of characteristics is the tendency to silence. This is certainly a study in itself and a number of narrative-tellers in the collection give many different kinds of 'silence' examples. Narrational gaps are not always inability to talk or a waiting-for-inspiration. Sometimes they are manipulated pauses, an eloquent substitute for words. It is important that students be familiar with the shadings of silence. Only by using a wide variety of recorded material is this possible.

The most exciting potential for teachers and students, however, is that this kind of material is readily available if we will take the trouble to go out of the classroom and find it. The possibilities are limitless. Schools could develop archives of material which would outline 'Community texts', personal histories framed against a changing locality; Ethnic stories could be collected and used in the classroom; story performers would be 'found' and might be brought into the classroom; students might be consciously trained to tell tales to each other, developing over their years in school oral techniques (their models and guides would be forever on hand in the tape collections). This simple activity in itself would produce more articulate adults than any other teaching 'method' yet devised. Finally, and most crucial in a recreational world dominated by technological media, a concentration upon the levels and kinds of spoken performances indicated in this monograph may help to counter that aspect of media which is the biggest danger for teachers of English. The tendency to deny language its natural fullness, intimacy and subtlety. Without the encouragement for a many-varied richness then our relationships lose the possibility of strength. The media offer us no toughness or sense of life replenishment. But, as teachers, we could go out to record speech, confession, interaction, reflection; could bring it back to the classroom to edit with our students and thereby focus on truths of people talking. With such material our students might be encouraged to create their own imaginative truths. In so doing we should be helping to unlock the artist in them through the serious use of an under-valued language and literary form.

More importantly, in my view, tapes like these demonstrate in simple ways how we learn and develop our own language. They involve students with familiar language and, by implication, underline that language is learned in a community. It is critically important for everyone that we understand the relationship between the way we see our language, and the way we see our society. Serious consideration of oral material, particularly that produced from direct experience, would also help to de-mystify literature and gradually to develop confidence and discriminations in language kinds.

Be this as it may, from my own point of view the tapes in the oral tradition *do* supply us with numerous instances of language at work, and more persuasively,

† P. Goodman, 'Speaking and Language. *Defence of Poetry*', (London, 1973), pp. 226-7.

people at work upon language. I cannot do better than to quote the American poet, William Stafford, to provide my final thoughts about this tradition, which I believe could provide us with a new centre from which to strike out.

> through our language . . . there are lines of force, areas of persuasion and power, not evident to us as speakers but operative when happened upon or deliberately chosen by (Poets) . . . speakers and writers all around us are either exceeding expected effect or are being baffled by invisible obstacles.*

*William Stafford, *The Hues of English*, (Illinois, USA, 1969).

Appendix

The tapes, in cassette form, are the property of the E.R.D.C. (PO Box 826, Woden, A.C.T. 2606). Further information about them can be obtained either from that body or from the author.
The following are the titles of the items in the collection of tapes.

People and Places

Northern Territory Aborigines
Grandfather's Life
Picking a Fight
The Man who Calls me a Mug
Early Motoring 1 & 2
The Station Cook
Can you Ride?
Melodienacht in Tanunda
Carpet Snake and the Alligator
A Bush Childhood
How Smacker Lived
Uncle Arch and the Cockatoos
Uncle Arch and the Watermelon
Uncle Arch and the Outhouse
Cane Cutting in Queensland
The Man Who Wanted Children
The Patient Horse Driver
The Death of Johnny Ah Kee
The Stuttering Driver
The Man who Topped Others' Stories
Swagmen's Union Rules

The Rural Life

Water Usage on the West Coast of S.A.
Barossa Valley Marriage Customs
Bees, Fish and Fireflies
Weather Lore
Opium in the Outback
Life in a Rural Town
Coaches and Coaching
The Importance of Talk in the Outback
Refugees in the North
The Steam Thresher
Northern Territory Characters
The Policeman in the Baler (I)
The Policeman in the Baler (II)
The Policeman in the Baler (III)
Bone Setting

Tales out of Schools

Winking at the Girls
The Girls and the Dog Cart
Pioneer School Days
School at Meningie

Aborigines

West-Coast Aborigines
Black and Yellow Babies
Aboriginal Life
N.T. Aborigines
Aboriginal Tales

Scenes from Clerical Life

West Coast Hospitality
A Bloody Fine Wife
A Case of Adultery
Depression on the Eyre Peninsula, S.A.
Mail Order Brides
The Bowling Alley
Gino and the Phone Call
Gino and the Fireworks
Gino and the TV Mast
Gino's Driving

Tales of Experience

American Civil War Ballad
The Sausage Factory
The Home Guard
The Woman
Recollection
The Occult
1 A Dream
2 Table Rapping
3 An Exorcism
Death on the Road
Death and Childhood
Journey to Australia

The Depression

Depression at Renmark
The Professor and Others
Fooling the Policeman
Selling Fruit
Bagman Apprentices
The Dole Payment
A Man called Needles
The Inexperienced Stowaway
The Trip Home
Stowaway

Horses and other Animals

Horse-breaking
Cruelty in the Cattle Industry
Horse Stories
The Cat and the Partridges
The Drunken Rooster
The Cat and the Volcanic Cell

Fish, Ducks and Wildlife

Stingray Story
Carpet Snakes
Snake Yarn
Shooting the Pet Duck
Duck Shooting at Meningie
Bees, Fish and Fireflies
Uncle Arch and the Fishing Trip

Tall Stories of Australia

The Champion Runner
Carpet Snakes
Shoe-ing Turkeys
The Champion Pumpkin
The Great Australian Short Story
Dogs for Droving Rabbits
Queensland Farming
The Champion Bullocky
Burketown Mosquitoes 1
2
3
Mosquitoes 1
2
The Parson and the Bullocky
How the River Murray got its Bends
The Bullocky and the Hotel
The Drunk and the Hotel
The Scott and the Pipes
Shooting Cape Barren Geese
How Smacker came to Queensland
The Tall Story
A Dog Called Charles
Banana Bending
The Man Who Stole Wheelbarrows
Aubrey, the Smart Dog and the Flea
How Smacker Lived
The Smart Dog
The Performing Goanna
Bung-eye Bill
The Champion Axeman
The Lost Stranger
The Champion Baker
Silent Sam and the Madman
The Man who Ate Grass
Old Davey shoots Geese
Silent Sam and the Hoop Snake
Problems with Mud
Silent Sam and the Shark
Cray-fishing
Dhu Fish
Shooting Hares
Silent Sam and the Bottle Drive
The Great Australian Whinger

Crooked Mick and the Speewah

Crooked Mick and the Pastry Cook
Crooked Mick goes Fencing
A Dog called Wattle
Crooked Mick makes Tea
Crooked Mick and the Speewah
Crooked Mick and the Devil
Description of Speewah country
Crooked Mick and Big Barnett
Crooked Mick and the Boar 1
2
Crooked Mick and the Kangaroo
Crooked Mick and the Giant Cod
Crooked Mick and the Rabbit Plague

Tales of Innocence

The Schoolboys' Excuse
Chastisement with 'Good Words'
A Royal British Object
Scotty and the Pipes
How the Vine come to the Barossa

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